

Ronald-Brennan House  
631 S. Fifth Street  
Louisville  
Jefferson County  
Kentucky

HABS No. KY-118

HABS,  
KY,  
56-LOUVI  
9-

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Architectural and Engineering Record  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20243

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

RONALD-BRENNAN HOUSE

HABS No. KY-118

Location: 631 South Fifth Street, Louisville, Jefferson County, Kentucky.

Present Owner: The Filson Club.

Present Use: House Museum.

Significance: The Ronald-Brennan house, a good example of Italianate design, has been carefully preserved by the Brennan family, who have left the house with its excellent late 19th century and early 20th century furnishings to the Filson Club for use as a museum.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1868. This is verified by the listing of F.S.J. Ronald at this address in the City Directory for 1869. In 1868 he was listed as residing at 230 West Walnut. City tax records for 1867 indicated a value of improvements on the property as \$0, whereas in 1868 they valued \$15,000.
2. Architect: Not known.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The Ronald-Brennan House is built on lot 97 of block 13-K in the City of Louisville. The following references tracing the title of this lot are found in the Jefferson County, Kentucky Deed Books.

1864 Deed, May 7, 1864, recorded in Deed Book 117, page 612. J. Lawrence Smith and Sarah Julia Smith sold a 50' x 200' lot, composed of lot 52 and 15 feet of lot 51 of Bustard's Subdivision, to Francis S. J. Ronald for \$3,500.

1878 Deed, July 27, 1878, recorded in Deed Book 219, page 281. Isaac Caldwell and Kate Caldwell conveyed to William A. Ronald, Jr. and Mary de Cantillon Lawson, the only children and heirs of F.S.J. Ronald by will, June 11, 1875, recorded in Will Book 8, page 568, a 15' x 200' lot adjacent to the south side of the earlier lot. On March 2, 1867 the Caldwells had sold the lot to F.S.J. Ronald for \$1500. However, Mr. Ronald did not pay them. As a result, this later deed was made selling the lot to his heirs for the original price plus 6 per cent interest.

- 1878 Deed, November 19, 1878, recorded in Deed Book 221, page 575. W.A. Ronald, Jr., trustee of Mary de Cantillon Lawson, D.M. Lawson and Mary de Cantillon Lawson conveyed the lots to P. Megnier, trustee of W.A. Ronald, Jr., bankrupt.
- 1884 Deed, May 23, 1884, recorded in Deed Book 271, page 152. Wm. A. Ronald, Jr., trustee, Wm. A. Ronald, Lucie F. Ronald, D.M. Lawson and Mary D. Lawson sold the lot to Thomas Brennan for \$12,000.
- 1914 Will, written June 4, 1908, recorded in Will Book 33, page 302. Thomas Brennan, deceased February 27, 1914, left the family home to his daughter, Beulah Bruce Brennan, according to the second codicil of his will.
- 1952 Will, written November 18, 1939, recorded in Will Book 33, page 347. Beulah Bruce Brennan, deceased February 24, 1952, left the family home to her brothers and sister.
- 1963 Will, written January 8, 1960, recorded in Will Book 118, page 317. J.A.O. Brennan, deceased September 1, 1963, left the family home to the Filson Club, according to item number four of the will.
- 1969 Deed, December 12, 1969, recorded in Deed Book 4322, page 504. Albert A. Brennan and Bruce Brennan, surviving members of the Brennan family, conveyed the family home to the Filson Club.
4. Alterations and additions: It is not known when the house was first painted its present chocolate brown. However, it is certain that it was not during this century. The exterior color has remained the same since first painted.

According to N. Bruce Brennan a Mr. Duncan laid the present wallpaper in the house. John W. and Thomas B. Duncan are listed in City Directories as wallpaperers throughout the last half of the 19th century and into the 20th century. Before the present coats of interior were applied, all the wallpaper was light except in the bedroom directly behind the northwest bedroom, which was black with gold figures.

According to N. Bruce Brennan, all fireplaces in the house are original except the dining room fireplace and the upstairs rear bedroom, which replaced cast-iron mantels. He cites Frederick E. Gott as having executed the dining room mantel in 1904. The mantel's heavy French Renaissance Revival style in Caen stone lends credence to the date. Frederick Gott emigrated from Germany in 1888. Upon arriving he gained the position of foreman of the

marble department of Blatz and Krebs Stone Co. In 1902 he was superintendent of the marble department of A. & O. Manufacturing Co.; in 1904 and 1905 he was superintendent at Standard Manufacturing Co., and from 1906 onward he was an independent contractor. Mr. Brennan cites a Mr. Harris as having carved the rear upstairs bedroom mantle. John Harris and his son, John, Jr. were listed in City Directories as stonemasons throughout the last half of the 19th century and into the 20th century. Because of the extreme similarity of mantles throughout the house with the mantle in the rear bedroom, as well as visible alterations in the flooring pattern at the base of many of the mantels and the retention of iron fenders in sharp stylistic contrast with the parlor mantles, it is highly probable that all the mantles in the house were originally of cast-iron and were replaced with the present marble mantles by John Harris. Because the mantles are for coal grates, rather than wood, virtually assures that they are not original. Because Mr. Brennan cannot remember their installation, it is quite conceivable that they were installed following the purchase of the house in 1884. His birth date in 1886 places their installation either prior to his birth or during his early childhood.

When the house was electrified at the turn of the century, all original gas fixtures, except two fixtures in the form of calla lilies in the bay window arch of the parlor, were removed.

Following the turn of the century terrazzo flooring was installed in the first floor service wing to the rear of the dining room. New wood flooring was installed in the bedroom directly behind the northwest corner bedroom and the large doorway was blocked. New bathrooms in the house were installed at this time. On the second and first floors the east bay of the north veranda was enclosed. On the second floor this new room was made into a bathroom for the bedroom. The bedroom was occupied by Mrs. Bruce, mother-in-law to Thomas Brennan. Prior to her arrival it had been two rooms, one of which was a small billiard room with access only from the veranda and the other of which was a linen closet. Emil Becker, cabinetmaker, constructed the bookcases in the library to match the earlier desk. Previously, the library had been used as a music room. All the windows in the house were changed from clear glass to leaded, frosted glass, some with family seals.

In 1912 the two-room doctor's office to the north was built for Dr. J.A.O. Brennan.

In 1936, following a paralytic stroke, Thomas Brennan, II converted the former laundry room at the southeast corner of the house into a bedroom. The mantle and light date from this remodeling. In 1969, etched glass on front door panel broken by an intruder was replaced with clear glass.

- B. Historical Context: Francis S. J. Ronald was a tobacco merchant in Louisville, who, with several of his brothers, owned the Ninth Street Tobacco Warehouse at the northeast corner of Ninth Street. He had served as Deputy Sheriff in 1848 and as High Sheriff in 1852. Averaging an annual income of approximately \$7,500 during the 1860s, received \$24,449 in 1864, which obviously helped to spur plans for the construction of a new home. Following his death in 1873, his two children inherited his estate. His son, William A. Ronald, proceeded to go bankrupt, finally selling the home to Thomas Brennan in 1884.

Thomas Brennan was born January 8, 1839 in Clogrenan, Queens County, Ireland. Sources conflict concerning his childhood. Some say he emigrated in 1841 at the age of three to the United States with his grandmother, who settled in New Orleans, thence to St. Louis and Cincinnati and finally to Louisville. Others say they came directly to Louisville. Still others say he came at the age of nine with his parents to Louisville, where he received his education. However, it is known that he displayed a natural ability with mechanical devices which he soon put to good use. He was the first to successfully build and operate a sawmill with an iron rack and pinion attachment. He was also one of four men who built the first locomotive for the Louisville and Nashville Railroad Company. He perfected the seed drilling machine by using a combination of rubber tubing and an iron shoe. With the basis of these and other inventions he developed as a manufacturer of sawmill and agricultural machinery, exhibiting his machinery throughout the United States. He received 27 first prizes for his inventions, including several at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. In 1864 he began working as foreman of Munn and Company at Eighth and Grayson Streets in Louisville. In 1866 he joined Abraham G. Munn in a partnership in the firm of Brennan and Company in the same location. In 1868 the firm merged with the Southwestern Agricultural Works, forming the Brennan and Co., Southwestern Agricultural Works at the corner of Eighth and Green Streets. Munn was president and Brennan, vice-president, later president. Following his retirement in 1897 he devoted himself extensively to traveling. A sufferer of asthma, he was one of the early seekers of the curative effects of spas. In 1872 he began summering in Petoskey, Minnesota among the Indians there. In the 1870s he frequented Hot Springs, Arkansas, where he established the first hardware store. He preferred to winter in Florida. In September 1869 he married Anna Virginia Bruce. To them were born nine children, eight of whom survived to old age. Following his death on February 27, 1914, he was interred in Cave Hill Cemetery.

Anna Virginia Bruce Brennan, wife of Thomas Brennan, was born in 1843 in St. Heliers, Isle of Jersey to the Rev. Napoleon Gubbins Bruce and Mary A. Bruce. Rev. Napoleon Gubbins Bruce, LL.D., A.M., D.D., was an Anglican priest, a Fellow of the Royal College of Preceptors of London, and a lineal descendant of Robert Bruce, King of Scotland. Her mother, a fluent linguist, was born March 25, 1825. Following the

death of her husband she joined her daughter in Louisville, where she lived the remainder of her life, dying June 23, 1908. While on the Isle of Jersey, the family was intimately acquainted with Victor Hugo who was living there at the time. Following emigration, Anna Bruce attended Wesleyan College, Cincinnati, Ohio, where she studied five languages which she spoke fluently throughout her life. It was through her father that the family's penchant for Napoleonic memorabilia was acquired. She preceded her mother in death, dying May 13, 1909.

Mrs. May Bruce Brennan Washington, eldest daughter of the Brennans, was born June 28, 1870. A noted beauty, she also possessed great talent. Like her mother and grandmother she was multi-lingual. Following graduation from Wellesley College in Cincinnati she attended the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music where she studied piano. She maintained a residence in New York City with her brother, Albert. Her husband, Lanier Washington, was a New York businessman. An unhappy marriage, it ended in divorce. Childless, she died July 10, 1959 and was interred in Cave Hill Cemetery.

Thomas Munn Brennan, first-born son, was born November 16, 1870. Like the four generations before him, he was named Thomas, continuing the tradition. Unfortunately, he died in infancy.

Henry Martyn "Harry" Brennan was born December 1, 1872. Following education at local private schools he attended Highland Military Academy in Worcester, Massachusetts. At the age of 15 he began work for Brennan and Company, Southwestern Agricultural Works, eventually becoming vice-president. Following the sale of the company to American Seeding Company in 1901 he was appointed to the Board of Safety of Louisville by Mayor Charles Grainger, serving until 1905. From 1905 through 1907 he was City Gas Inspector. In 1909 he helped organize the Arctic Ice Company and served as its president until its sale in 1915. From 1915 through 1923 he was president of the Metropolitan Realty Company. He had also worked for the Merchants Ice Company and the Central Consumers Company from 1907 through 1909. Following his retirement in 1923 he traveled widely in Europe. A lifelong Democrat, he was appointed U.S. Collector of Customs by President Roosevelt for Louisville in 1934, which position he maintained until his death. A member of the Pendennis Club in Louisville, he also served as exalted ruler of Louisville Lodge of Elks, and as a colonel on the staffs of seven Kentucky governors. Unmarried, he died May 29, 1948 and was interred in Cave Hill Cemetery.

Albert Andrews Brennan was born August 7, 1874. His education began with private tutors, followed by attendance at the school operated by Hiram A. Gooch at 1035 Fourth Street, Rugby School at the corner of Fifth and York Streets, and Centre College from which he graduated in 1895. Following his graduation he began work for his father's firm, leaving in 1900 prior to its sale. From 1902 through 1909 he worked for the New York Telephone Company in New York City. From 1910

through 1950 he served as secretary and director of Jacob Rupert, Inc., a New York brewing company. In 1911 Jacob Rupert, owner of the New York Yankees baseball team, appointed Albert Brennan to the position of executive assistant. In 1920 he became treasurer of the Yankees. Following his retirement in 1950 he lived in New York City, later returning to Louisville, where he donated many antiques from his New York residence to the Filson Club, of which he, as well as all his brothers and sisters, were endowment members. Unmarried, he died at the age of 97 on September 29, 1971 and was interred in Cave Hill Cemetery.

Thomas Brennan, II, was born June 13, 1876. An outstanding athlete at Manual Training High School, he was later to become one of the best athletes at the Louisville Athletic Club. Following graduation from high school, he attended Massachusetts Institute of Technology, studying engineering. Following in the footsteps of his father, he became a widely known engineer throughout the West and Middle West, dealing also in agricultural implements. He returned to Louisville in 1936 after suffering a paralytic stroke, living in the family home until his death in 1939, at the age of 63. Unmarried, he was interred in Cave Hill Cemetery.

Robert Emery Brennan was born January 18, 1879. His education was conducted at Benjamin H. Waddell's Private School, Louisville Male High School, and the University of Louisville Medical School, from which he received an M.D. degree. From 1900 through 1906 he pursued post-graduate work in London, Vienna, and Paris. During the First World War he served as a Junior Lieutenant in the U.S. Medical Corps. A noted surgeon, he operated on Jack Dempsey and Damon Runyon, serving later as one of the characters in one of Runyon's books. An outstanding athlete, he played football in high school, was a champion boxer at the Louisville Athletic Club, and enjoyed golf throughout his life. He was a member of the Pilgrims Society, the American Medical Association, a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons, Diplomate of the American Board of Surgery, and vice-president of the Board of Trustees of the Polyclinic Hospital in New York City, where he served following his honorable discharge at the end of the war. On April 14, 1929 he was married to Adele Bowne Carpenter (May 4, 1886-May 18, 1952). Childless, he died March 31, 1969 at the age of 90 and was interred in Cave Hill Cemetery.

John Arvid Oucterlony Brennan was born March 11, 1880. Educated first in public schools, then at Benjamin H. Waddell's Private School, he followed his elder brother and attended the University of Louisville Medical School from which he, too, received an M.O. degree. Following graduation in 1901, he pursued post-graduate work in Vienna, Paris, and Berlin. During World War I he served as a Captain in the Medical Corps, stationed at Army Hospital 28 at Fort Sheridan, Illinois. He established his office in the family home in 1912 and maintained an active practice throughout his life. He was an active member of the

Filson Club, the Pendennis Club, St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Louisville Lodge of Elks, Phi Chi fraternity, the American Medical Association, the International College of Surgeons, Louisville Society of Medicine, Louisville Society of Physicians and Surgeons, Jefferson County and Kentucky State Medical Societies, and the Southern Medical Society. On September 1, 1963, at the age of 83, he passed away quietly at home. Burial followed in Cave Hill Cemetery.

Beulah Bruce Brennan was born March 3, 1882. A concert violinist, she was also proficient with the piano. Following an exceptional musical education she studied at the Sorbonne in Paris. After graduation she toured Europe, often with her sister who served as accompanist on the piano. The outbreak of World War II brought her illustrious career to a close. Unmarried, she died February 27, 1952 and was interred in Cave Hill Cemetery.

Napoleon Bruce Brennan was born September 9, 1886. His education began in Louisville schools. Following graduation he attended Centre College and the University of Louisville Law School. He entered the practice of law with Frederick Forcht and William H. Field in Louisville. He then served as a lawyer with Roy Curtis at Fidelity and Casualty Company, followed with a service of 2-1/2 years with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. He then worked in the insurance business with Levi Bloom and Richard Hermann, later working for E.A. Gnau Company. Still living, he remains unmarried at the age of 87.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### General description:

The Italianate house, built in 1868, also contains Victorian elements as seen in doorways, windows and porches. The brick house has stone quoins at the corners, as does the 2-room doctor's office addition to the north of the house. The Italianate roofs are typically flat and bracketed. Between the addition and the house is the three-story L-shaped ell, also in Italianate style, with a second floor balcony with an ornate cast metal railing. Of particular note is the two-story side porch on south elevation of the house. Its handsome railing has vase-shaped splats and its floor and roof are supported by chamfered posts with reinforcing brackets. Two semi-octagonal bay windows occupy north and south elevations, giving the house further architectural distinction.

The predominantly Victorian styling of interior includes marble mantelpieces with ornamentation and arched fireboxes, a number of 19th century chandeliers, molded door and window enframements, picture, cornice and baseboard moldings, heating fixtures and others of particular note. A pair of lily bracket gas fixtures manufactured circa 1855 is in the bay window of the Drawing Room. Scroll work decorates the sides of the stairway treads. The dining room mantelpiece of Caen stone is charming- cherubs and flowers on vases in French Renaissance Revival style. It is not original to the house (see Alterations and additions section).



PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Interviews:

Interviews conducted throughout the month of August, 1974 between Miss Thelma Dolan of The Filson Club and N. Bruce Brennan, surviving member of the Brennan family, concerning family history in relationship to the house and alterations made to the house.

B. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished Sources:

Deed Books located in the Clerk's Office, Jefferson County Courthouse, Louisville, Kentucky.

Will Books located in the Probate Office, Jefferson County Courthouse, Louisville, Kentucky.

Louisville City Tax Assessment Books located in the Kentucky State Archives, Frankford, Kentucky.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Louisville Directories for the years 1865 through 1915.  
Kerr's History of Kentucky, Vol. IV, 1928, p. 1045, 1046.

"Incomes for 1866," Louisville Daily Courier, June 1, 1867.

"Incomes for 1867," Louisville Courier, July 1, 1868.

"Handsome Gift for Col. Harry M. Brennan," Courier-Journal, December 3, 1905.

"Col. Brennan's Birthday," Louisville Times, December 3, 1905, p. 1.

"Operation Futile," Courier-Journal, May 14, 1908, p. 8, col. 3.

"Wife of Prominent Business Man Dies," Louisville Herald, May 14, 1908, p. 10, cols. 6,7.

"Estimable Woman," Louisville Times, May 14, 1908, p. 5, col. 2.

"Funeral of Mrs. Bruce Tomorrow Afternoon," Courier-Journal, June 25, 1908, p. 3, cols. 7,8.

"Childhood Friend of Victor Hugo Dies in This City," Louisville Herald, June 25, 1908, p. 5, col. 4.

"Laid to Rest In Cave Hill Cemetery," Louisville Times, June 25, 1908, p. 8, col. 2.

"Life's Close," Courier-Journal, February 28, 1914, p. 7.

"Life's Close for Thomas Brennan," Evening Post, February 27, 1914, p. 1, col. 6.

"Thomas M. Brennan Suddenly Stricken," Louisville Herald, February 28, 1914.

"Death Comes to Widely Known Man," Louisville Times, February 27, 1914, p. 1, cols. 4,5.

"Pioneer Manufacturer Victim of Infirmities," Louisville Times, February 27, 1914, p. 1, cols. 1,2 p. 9.

"Death Takes Thos, Brennan, Engineer Here," Courier-Journal, November 9, 1939, p. 6 col. 3.

"Customs Chief; Here, Harry Brennan, Dies," Courier-Journal, May 30, 1948.

"Funeral Here Friday for Concert Violinist", Courier-Journal, February 27, 1952.

"Miss Beulah Brennan," Courier-Journal, February 27, 1952.

"Ex-Louisville Beauty, Mrs. Washington, Dies," Courier-Journal, July 11, 1959.

"Mrs. May B. Washington," Courier-Journal, July 14, 1959.

"Island of Elegance," by Helen Leopold, Louisville Times, October 9, 1960.

"Well, Those Brennan Boys Are Back," Courier-Journal, October 7, 1960.

"Dr. John Brennan Dies at Age 83," Courier-Journal, September 2, 1963.

"Brennan Funeral Thursday," Louisville Times, September 3, 1963.

"Burial Thursday", Louisville Times, September 3, 1963.

"Brennan Leaves \$1-1/4 Million", Courier-Journal, September 25, 1963.

"Brennan Bequest Hold Future Hope," Courier-Journal, September 27, 1963.

"Damon Runyon Doctor, Robert Brennan, Dies," Courier-Journal, April 1, 1969.

"A.A. Brennan, Former Baseball Official, Dies," Louisville Times, September 30, 1971.

"The Brennan House," Louisville (magazine), August, 1974.

"Here is a Personal Glimpse of the Owner of the House Where Time Has Stood Still," undated, unsigned newspaper clipping at the Filson Club.

"The Brennan Family Home: A Preliminary Report," by Nelson L. Dawson, The Filson Club History Quarterly, April, 1974, vol. 48, no. 2, pp. 210-212.

#### PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in cooperation with the Preservation Alliance of Louisville and Jefferson County, Inc. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, chief of HABS, the project was completed during the summer of 1974 at the HABS Field Office in Louisville by Prof. John Haggard, (Syracuse University), Project Supervisor; David Arbogast (Columbia University), Project Historian; Mary Oehrlein, Project Foreman; Bayer Lee (City College of New York), Architect; and Mary M. Herd (University of Tennessee) and Charles Raith (University of Cincinnati), student assistant architects. Susan McCown, a HABS staff historian in the Washington, D.C. office, edited the written descriptive data in the spring of 1981, for transmittal to the Library of Congress. HABS staff photographer Jack E. Boucher took the photographs of the structures in 1979.

ADDENDUM TO  
RONALD-BRENNAN HOUSE  
(BRENNAN HOUSE)  
631 South Fifth Street  
Louisville  
Jefferson County  
Kentucky

HABS No. KY-118

HABS  
KY,  
56-LOUVI,  
9-

XEROGRAPHIC COPIES OF COLOR TRANSPARENCIES

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20013